

Through Her (True Her) is an exhibition on the theme of invisibility. It deals specifically with the invisibility of the body of black women, considered as a generic group. The project departs from the observation that black women are deleted from the sphere of public life and that they are oppressed in our essentially capitalist society. Not only are black women without a voice, but they are also associated on the one hand with a collective identity and on the other with a clichéd culture that is considered inferior. Departing from this observation, independent curator Anne Wetsi Mpoma has invited (mainly) Belgian women artists of African descent to show works that are anchored in their artistic practice and that can function as a beacon for a new outlook on their history. Some of these women artists have created works during a residential stay that lasted for several weeks, while others have selected existing work for this exhibition.

Anne Wetsi Mpoma: “As a curator, I have tried to make visible the collective history by articulating questions or narrating personal stories. These stories explore how they were passed on, as well as the concept of cultural heritage and the so-called subordinate culture, which we, as black women, have inherited. We constantly use the concept of creativity to refer to the vitality of these artists born in Africa, or who are considered children of the continent. Works of art are consumer goods that are supposed to bestow social prestige and an identity to their owners. In today’s mass society, the art market faces a demand for originality. This constant call for novelty is often met with artists seeking ‘inspiration’ in Africa and other non-European civilizations that are considered to be ‘different’. In this context, there’s a real risk ‘that if artists are constantly being marginalized, they will start to use their stigmatized identity to play an “authenticity game”. (...) Though such a view shows that the artist assesses the situation correctly, it also transforms him or her into a *subordinate role*.’ (Bruno Trentini in: *L’authenticité postcoloniale des artistes : entre émancipation des Suds et voyeurisme économique de l’Occident*, 2019)

At this exhibition, we ‘sell’ the public neither creativity, nor authenticity. What the artists show, is their humanity and their dignity. Their right to exist as a woman and as a true artist. The leitmotif that links the works selected, exists in its own right. The works represent a response to the deletion of a complete category of artists from the history of art. At a time when lots of art institutions wonder how they can feminize their collection, the issue of black women artists or women artists of African descent is still not high on the agenda. Yet these artists exist and are very much alive! By occupying the space of the Cultural Centre Strombeek for two months, they show us how they resist, what they believe in, and they confront us with their own story about what motivates them. They use different media that link up with contemporary or present art practices from the 21st century, their age varies from 19 to 50 years or more, their careers are at different stages and the questions they ask are different. But all of them show their *true her*, themselves as they are, without burdening the visitor with guilt, or without emphasizing the extent to which society has become used to looking ‘through her’.

From the very start of the project, we wanted to respond to how the body of black women is made invisible in the postcolonial context of our society. How do we survive the organized deletion and the categorization as belonging to a subordinate culture? Installations, soundscapes, video, multimedia, photographs, paintings on canvas, aluminium or paper, engravings, paper cuttings and light, family archives and histories, movement, dance,

chemical changes caused by fire, recombinations of things: these are the expressive tools these women use to tell us their story. Each of them uses images or sounds on which she projects her inner life or world view.”

In Studio S, **Debbie Engala** from Collective Nymphose (a collective of artists with African roots, who all study art in Brussels) has chosen for a sort of abstract geometry. Debbie paints on paper and what is important for her is the effect the object produces, rather than the object itself. This allows her to express an emotion and focus on the completion of a gesture and on her obsession to leave behind a trace of it.

Leïla Nsengiyumva (Collective Nymphose) submerges herself in her memories of childhood with the aid of the family photo archive. In the latter she discovers the love that connects her parents, as well as the hills of their native country Rwanda—a place she herself has never been. She reconstructs this dream universe with embroidery, tapestry and manipulated photographs.

Lauren Lizinde is the youngest member of Collective Nymphose and of all artists participating in the exhibition. Through a video work, Lizinde explores her place in society and her deletion from her own history in her family circle. Her parents were born in Rwanda, but never told her anything about their native country. The young woman explores the reason and how she can find a place for herself in society.

The last artist from Collective Nymphose to present her work is **Luna Mahoux**. She’s a young Ethiopian woman who grew up in a white family that adopted her at the age of three. With a video installation, Mahoux explores the femininity of black women as propagated by young girls on social networks such as Instagram. Her quest confronts her with her self-image, her own femininity and Africanity. What is like to be an African woman? How can she integrate Africanity in her person?

By exploring the place of the black body in the public or intimate space, **Agnès Lalau** and **Wata Kawatza** revise large parts of the colonial history. Thus the deletion of a Congolese grandmother from the family history (*Missbluu*) or the search for the meaning of a female Kifwebe mask (*Nzete*) makes visible the violence in the relationship between rulers and ruled as two peoples met. The mask inspires the artist to explore how so-called ethnographic objects are exhibited to date in Belgian and European institutions. The artist addresses the same theme in the animated film *Shaba*, that focuses on woodcuts printed on tracing paper. All the violence of the oppressive regime becomes visible in the verticality of the Congolese bodies depicted. *Missbluu* is a video installation featuring the silhouette of a black woman who moves like ‘a liana from a rubber tree’. It’s through this movement and her research that the artist, as she claims, has found words and healing for her family history.

For her video installation *Re-Narration Tutorial*, **Laura Nsengiyumva** didn’t simply find inspiration in archives. She used old copies of the Nazi propaganda magazine *Signal* (now worth a considerable amount of money) to create a new paper medium. The artist tore up the magazines—a liberating gesture, she stated—and then used the scraps to make paper pulp. On this she applied images of an unknown Congolese soldier who fought for Belgium in

the Second World War, and of a female character that symbolizes the deletion of black people from the country's history.

Asia Mireille Nyembo wonders how long the bodies of black women will still be weighed down by the yoke of patriarchal and postcolonial domination (*How Much Longer!*). Having trained as a scientist, Nyembo indulges in all sorts of chemical experiments on fabrics. She reports on these in a large-scale multimedia installation. Because she is dissatisfied with the history of 'African wax'—a printed fabric that is presented as the cultural symbol of African women—she burns pieces of fabric to transform them and have them tell their own story. 'It's out of the question to let others speak for us.'

Rokia Bamba's soundscape *Stigmat(e)s* tunes in to this idea. Four women of African descent answer questions by the artist. Her first question is to state their surname and first name. For most people, stating their first name seems like an innocent question, but for a Belgian woman of African descent, the question may have serious implications with regard to their identity. Will they state their Christian name, their European first name or their Congolese first name? The name on her identity papers or the name with which her family addresses her? Gradually, the conversations become more intimate and submerge the public in a sound bath.

On the ground floor, we're once again confronted with the theme of the invisible woman in the universe of photographer **Hélène Amouzou**, who presents a series of self-portraits. Amouzou shows photographs of the performances (2008-2011) she staged in the intimacy of her attic, away from prying eyes. For her, this was a way to respond to the need to stay invisible, because her stay in Belgium was 'neither regular nor legal'. In this way the artist draws attention to the people who are often referred to as the *sans-papiers* (undocumented immigrants): people who live in constant fear of being torn from their daily lives following a simple police control. The mise en scène of the photographs plays with the concepts of presence and transparency, which the photographer has caught in small formats that prompt the visitor to come closer and look carefully.

Pascale Obolo's film *La femme invisible* has been inspired by a novel by Afro-American author Robert Gordon that dates from the time of the *Harlem Renaissance*. In his best-seller from the 1930s, Gordon describes the experiences of an invisible man in a society in which race defines every aspect of life. Obolo presents her female version of the story, which is now set in 'Paris' in the early 21st century.

Odette Messenger is another artist who explores the place of the black body in space. In her intimate portraits, she presents an update of the power relationships in the colonial and postcolonial context. *Tatu Mamu* and *Family Portrait* (paintings on respectively canvas and aluminium) feature a young girl that struggles with her family history, which is directly linked to the history of the prevailing power relationships at the time of colonial rule. We thus witness how the system of political dominance seeps into intimate relationships.

In the film *Occupy Von Puttkammer (Part II)* Pascale Obolo researches the traces of the old colonial power relationships in public space—not in Belgium or France, as is often the case, but in Cameroon. Why was this castle—an exact copy of a German castle built in the early

20th century in Cameroon, then a colony of the powerful Germany? Who lives there now? Why hasn't anyone ever considered demolishing the building?

Disproving myths and stereotypes associated in Western culture with black women: that's what **Muhiba Botan** aspires in her work *The Myth of the Other*, a series of eight photographs. With these photographs the artist denounces the primitive associations thought up by the colonial propaganda in order to justify white dominance over the local resources and the body of the colonized peoples. The result is a transformation of her body that complies with how black, racialized women, *and* white women are represented in the mainstream media.

Everywhere at this exhibition, the issue of healing is laterally present. But most explicitly it can be seen in Pascale Obolo's Super 8 film *Déambulation carnavalesque*. The film shows how black bodies, having been subjected to traumas such as slavery, engage in practices that bring a form of healing. The command to adapt and delete part of one's culture, and the sense of shame that accompanies the humiliation of this culture, are here sublimated in a sort of colourful tableau vivant.

The issue of care occupies an increasingly important place in the lives of black women. Numerous researchers liken people of African descent who are subjected every day to minor or major acts of aggression to people suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder. The feminist author and activist Audre Lorde believes that for people suffering from this disorder, the word has a liberating impact. And liberating themselves, that is precisely what the women in this project do by occupying the space of the cultural centre: they liberate themselves by emphasizing their own, distinctive qualities. Obolo's *Déambulation carnavalesque* delves deeper into this matter. The work shows us the ancestral African practice of trance. Typically the practice is viewed with different eyes depending on the race and gender of the person engaging in it. Here, the artist dares to do things few men or women of African descent are bold enough to do, even in art.

Finally, there's the work of **Albertine Libert**: a painting for which the artist has cut out shapes and figures from paper, which then emerge from the light. The work can be seen as an invitation to black women to take their place in society—a place that is the fruit of their wildest dreams, a place that can only be reached by flouting 'the injunction to be nothing'. Libert's message can be understood as, 'What the hell do you care if the world confuses you with a shapeless mass. You are a unique and precious individual! *Fuck!*'

Anne Wetsi Mpoma lives in Brussels. She's a writer, activist and researcher of art and culture. She studied art history at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, where she graduated in 2007. The visual and performance arts are her passion. After two years of experience at an art gallery in New York, she co-founded Nouveau Système Artistique (2008) and Wetsi Art Gallery (WAG, 2019). Wetsi Art Gallery wants to promote, distribute and realize projects of artists of African descent.

Anne Wetsi Mpoma was invited for this project as independent curator in the context of ***Being Imposed Upon***, a publication that is co-produced by Cc Strombeek and is meant as a response to the lack of visibility of women of African descent or women that belong to the African diaspora and that are active on the Belgian cultural scene. The initiators of the project were Vesna Faassen and Lukas Verdijk. The project originated in the context of a work about the Belgian colonization of Congo that is edited exclusively by Congolese artists living in Africa. At present women of African descent that live in Belgium are asked to contribute articles.